

# Photographer Benavides documents space history

**W**hen Benny Benavides' family moved to San Antonio in 1952, he had missed class registration at the local high school and, as such, he had limited options for elective classes. He was nonchalantly enrolled into an introductory photography class, but he had no idea where that class would eventually lead him.

After graduating from Lanier High School, he enlisted with the U.S. Army and was trained as a military combat photographer. In his years with the service, from 1955 to 1958, Benavides covered a wide range of military operations. Although the country was at peace, the interval between the Korean and Vietnam Wars, photographers were still in high demand and he honed his skills at the Guided Missile School at White Sands.

At the conclusion of his tour, Benavides found himself going to work as a photo lab technician for JSC, then called the Manned Spacecraft Center. At the time, the center was still being built. The photo lab, as with many of JSC's early offices, was located at Ellington Air Force Base until the MSC officially opened in 1962. Just as the Apollo Program was dawning, Benavides was promoted to NASA staff photographer and alas, a career in photography, at one of the world's most extraordinary sites, during its most remarkable period, was launched.

After 37 years as part of JSC's photography team, Benny Benavides bids farewell to the center that has become his second home. Through the camera lens, he has been privy to seeing firsthand some of the country's most historic moments, and more importantly, his images have been our eyes, bringing the story of human exploration of space to the world.

**Roundup:** You have been here during some of NASA's most exciting times. What stands out? What has been the most memorable for you?

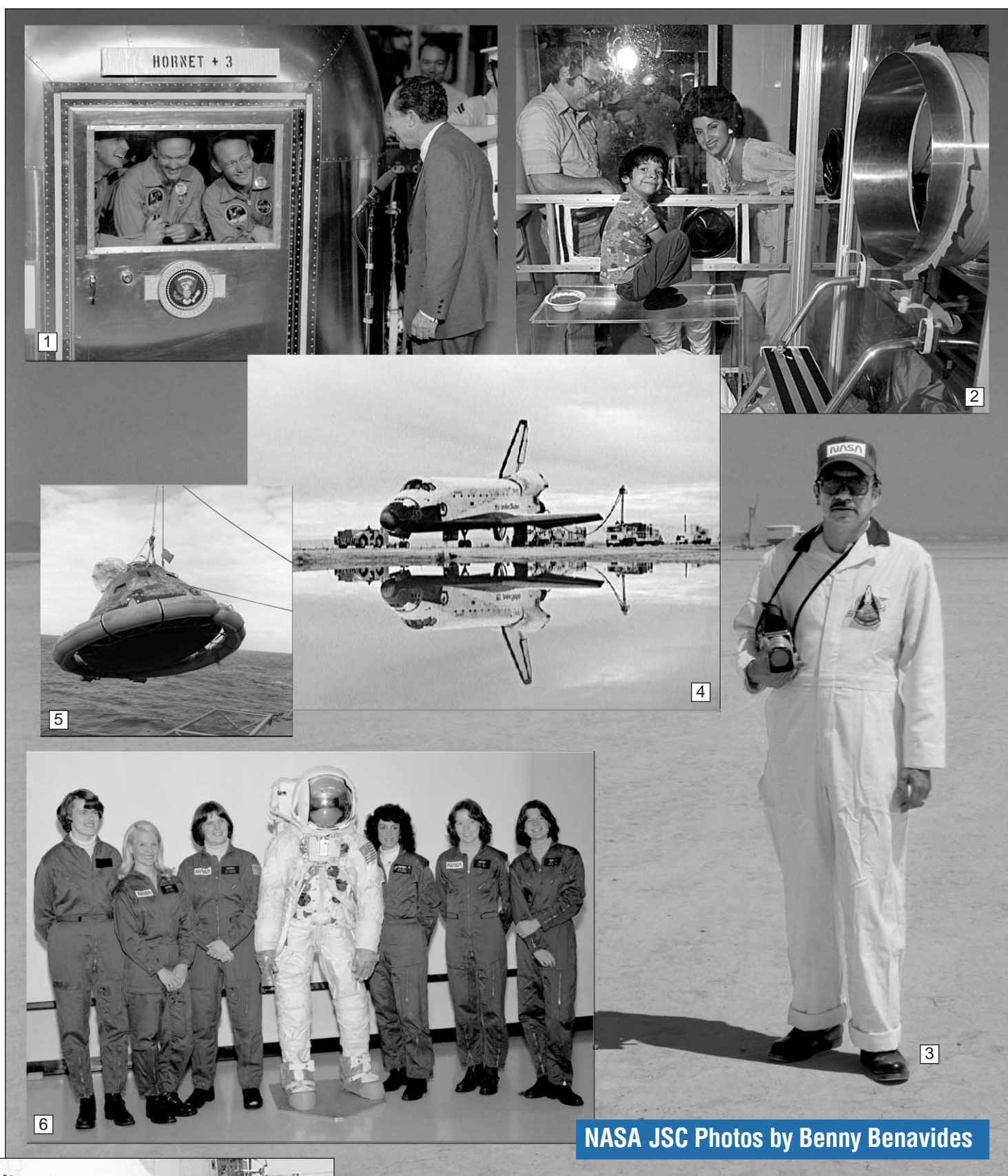
**Benavides:** There are so many. For me, every photo always had a story to itself. Every mission was like another level getting us to the Moon. I remember Apollo 11, being on the USS Hornet, retrieving the parachuters and picking up the astronauts and bringing them to the carrier. Then we went back to pick up the module. Later, I went with Michael Collins to bring the second batch of lunar samples to Houston. We had big boxes that we had them in. Then there was Apollo 13 and I was in the helicopter as we waited for them in the sky. We had to document everything.

To me, the photos documenting astronaut training in a chamber are just as important as those taken when we were picking up crewmembers from the ocean.

**Roundup:** Looking through NASA archives, including photos and past *Roundups*, there have been a lot of VIPs, celebrities and international dignitaries that have visited the center. Who are some of the people you were able to meet?

**Benavides:** Well, there was President Nixon who came onto the USS Hornet to congratulate the Apollo 11 astronauts. He was the first President I had worked with and it was very exciting. Everything on the ship was spic and span. There was lots of security, including destroyer ships nearby. But the mood was very exciting and happy. If you were to see the sequence of shots, there is a lot of laughter and smiling. It was a neat experience.

I've photographed other Presidents as well – George Bush when he was here



**NASA JSC Photos by Benny Benavides**

Photographer Benny Benavides is the man behind the camera for many familiar NASA photos. Shown here are some of his most noted photographs. (1) Onboard the USS *Hornet*, President Nixon congratulates the Apollo 11 crew. (2) Benavides chronicled many milestones as NASA worked to create a protective garment for David, a young boy restricted by an immune deficiency disorder. (3) Benavides caught on film while on site at Edwards Air Force Base for a shuttle landing of *Columbia*. (4) This impromptu photo of *Columbia* has been reproduced around the world. (5) Benavides was frequently dispatched onto Navy helicopters as the NASA photographer to document crew return operations and vehicle splashdown. (6) The official photo of NASA's first female astronauts. (7) Benavides was on hand for many of JSC's presidential and VIP visits, including this one by President Ronald Reagan and wife Nancy.

Another interesting visitor was the Queen of England. Houston Mayor Cathy Whitmire was there too, and while waiting, we began talking. We talked for 15 or 20 minutes while we waited for the Queen to arrive, so it's funny how it could have been different. If it were just the Mayor, I may not have gotten to talk to her, but because we were all waiting for the Queen, it was no big deal to talk to her then.

We also had the Dahli Lama visit the space center and that was really different. To see a holy person – that was interesting. Even though you are raised one way, you still have a sense of awe for this person.

**Roundup:** What was your proudest moment at NASA?

**Benavides:** I was really proud when we went to the Moon. You felt like you did your job, like you were part of the team even if you were a small, small part.

**Roundup:** What have you enjoyed the most about your job as a NASA photographer?

**Benavides:** Photography plays a big role in the space program. I have seen a lot of my pictures in school textbooks and

that means a lot to me – to know that I contributed to the history of the world.

There is a photo I took that has been used everywhere. It is a photo of the shuttle reflected in a pool of water. After every shuttle landing, we would stay with the shuttle as the crew gets out and walk with the shuttle all the way down to the hangar. This was at Dryden/Edwards Air Force Base, and as I was walking down the road, I saw a pool of water ahead and I could see the shot in my mind. I ran down ahead of the group to catch the shot. That photo has been used so much the negative doesn't exist anymore. It has been worn out. Now there are only copies of copies.

**Roundup:** What is your goal when you are shooting these photos, what are you trying to achieve?

**Benavides:** It depends on the type of shots. For engineering photos, I am trying to please the engineer and get what he needs, but for other photos, you want to tell the story. You want to capture feelings and emotions. Even if it's people walking through mockups, you can tell they are seeing the future ahead. ■



with the President of Mexico, and President Clinton.

**Roundup:** Have you ever been starstruck?

**Benavides:** No – the only one that really got me was David, the little boy with the impaired immune system who had to live in a bubble. NASA was helping to develop a suit for him so that he could go outside, and for months we saw him in the hospital, while shooting photographs for engineering purposes. We would go to the hospital to document things. We went maybe ten times or so but you know I watched him, and you still get close, so that when he died, that was very difficult.